Administrative History
A Graduate Student's Reflections

David Louter

On a late spring afternoon I sat in the office of my advising professor, listening as he described a job opening for a historian with the National Park Service. This would be a chance to make my graduate studies seem more real than imagined by putting my training to work on an administrative history. I had no idea of what an administrative history was. I knew little about public history, the Park Service, or cultural resources. My professional interests were undefined. My academic interests reflected only my love for the ironies of the human condition, western landscapes, and the protection of the last best places. National parks fell in this category.

I took the job. While writing an administrative history, I found a purpose. My "conversion experience" was one in which the process of writing taught me not just about administrative histories but about being a historian.

By the Park Service's definition, park administrative histories serve a distinct function. Aids to the Service's institutional memory, these histories of parks as parks are management tools. By covering parks' origins, development, and issues to the present and establishing contexts for past actions, they inform managers and their decisions. I discovered that they are more utilitarian than academic—a different type of history. Their primary intended audience is not other historians but park staffs, the community of people who protect park resources, clean campgrounds, and clear trails.

Unlike academic histories, administrative histories are driven more by the need to inform than to develop a thesis. To be successful they must still employ analysis, criticism, and synthesis—tools of the historian's trade. But while they appear to be simple documents, they address a variety of issues and topics that do not fit neatly within a single theory or concept.

Trained to think conceptually, I struggled with how to place the story of Craters of the Moon National Monument within the context of conservation history. If I did not, I somehow felt it would not be "good" history. I wanted to be Alfred Runte and write a natural resource management history of Yosemite. In a vivid and lucid style, I wanted to present the park's management as a struggle between preservation and use, the flawed NPS mission.

But as I soon learned, placing the monument's history within this argument might force content and conclusions. It might lead me to include information based on its importance to my thesis rather than its use to park managers. The history might fulfill my needs but not the park's.

My mentors in the Cultural Resources Division of the NPS Pacific Northwest Regional Office helped me to this awareness. They reminded me of my audience and the usefulness of the information I was supplying. At the same time, I learned that administrative histories were not mindless chronologies. The talents of a young, academically trained historian would not go to waste. I need not become a writer of vacuous prose, making frequent trips to the hardware store of agency history to buy more nuts and bolts for my project.

Even though there might be something to this metaphor, given the nature of a bureaucracy, it was important to see that park histories operated on two levels. On one, they revealed how parks shared in common the management conditions associated with the agency's mission. On the other, they showed how a park possessed its own unique set of management conditions depending on its type, purpose, and political environment. This diversity meant that no two administrative histories would be alike, that they are dynamic, organic documents.

Barry Mackintosh has made this point in writing about administrative history and demonstrated it in his own histories. In addition, Albert Hurtado wrote an essay on the craft of public history that I found inspirational. Hurtado, an accomplished historian in both public and academic history, noted that public historians enter previously uncharted territory. They produce "microhistories" that seek to understand particular places, often unknown, isolated, and unaddressed by secondary sources.[1]

Hal Rothman's works were also helpful. Rothman, like Hurtado, is experienced in both historical realms. In a scholarly monograph on national monuments he offered an important perspective for my own study. He argued that for much of their history monuments were "second class" sites, the neglected cousins of national parks, receiving minimal appropriations and little management attention. Yet Rothman did not seek to make his administrative history of Bandelier National Monument conform to this thesis. Written under contract to the Park Service, it reflected Rothman's deep understanding of agency and conservation history and Bandelier's place therein, but its focus on the area's management history was neutral in tone and interpretation.[2]

There were other "model" administrative histories, the thick and the thin, the streamlined and the thorough. Some focused on political issues and dramatic tension, others on more mundane but nevertheless important events. It was apparent that the content and extent of histories were often influenced by the availability of time, funding, and records as well as the nature and needs of the parks they addressed.

The Craters of the Moon history would begin at ground zero. The monument, proclaimed in 1924 to preserve some 54,000 acres of lava formations, was one of the older ones in the national park system. Yet it possessed no published history or agency studies. Its management history was virtually unknown. Some of the monument's records had made it to National Archives repositories, where I could only partially excavate them; others had been burned to make space for later files.

Just as the monument lay on the fringe of the Snake River plain, it lay on the fringe of Park Service manage-

(***Reflections***—*continued on page 12)*

(***Miracle***—*continued from page 10)*

prepared soon after the park's authorization and largely ignored. While the GMP's basic concept of retrieving the area from degradation and restoring and preserving it remained sound, many of its specific proposals were soon discounted. A surprising number of present park developments are not based in the GMP.

Because of the controversy surrounding CVNRA's first superintendent, the late William C. Birdsell, oral history proved vital in sorting out fact from fiction. Discussions with two former regional directors and three directors (Gary Everhardt, William Whalen, and Russell Dickenson) were all useful in understanding the contentious Birdsell era (1975–80) and the agonizing decision to transfer Birdsell to another post. After reading the analysis in the administrative history, Whalen informed me: "From time to time I have wondered about my decision regarding Bill Birdsell in late 1979. From reading your work I know I did the right thing. Prior to reading your work, I only felt that I was right and had pangs of doubt at the time of Bill's untimely death."

To ensure that the administrative history would be balanced, it was important to solicit the views of CVNRA's most vocal opponents. My initial introduction at the home of a member of the Cuyahoga Valley Residents and Homeowners Association gave me a vivid first-hand impression of years of hard feelings between the park and residents. After the family's attack dog greeted me at the front door, the female resident, upon noticing my NPS name bar, said she didn't care if her dog "takes a bite out of the Park Service man's leg." Also present were two other homeowners association members who were curious about the project. Hostility evaporated when they realized that the NPS seriously wanted to record their attitudes about years of stormy relations. These opponents became friends, even to the point of reviewing and commenting on the draft study. In the end, they were pleased by the administrative history's fair and objective treatment of them, and the NPS became a little less monstrous in their eyes.

Without the interviews, the final product would be nothing more than a recitation of official memoranda and letters. Oral history made the document come alive and be a much more interesting and useful tool for park management. When the upcoming GMP gets underway, the team will have a good grasp of how and why developments at CVNRA evolved.

The regional office judged the interviews of sufficient value in and of themselves to reproduce them in a separate 780-page adjunct to the 542-page administrative history. This makes them readily accessible to those wanting to know everything the interviewees had to say about CVNRA. Several readers have found the oral history compendium at least as interesting and informative as the administrative history itself.

Ron Cockrell is senior research historian in the NPS Midwest Regional Office. His *A Green Shrouded Miracle: The Administrative History of Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area, Ohio* was published by that office in 1992.

(***Reflections***—*continued from page 11)*

ment. It occupied a place in the back of the agency mind. It lacked the kind of dramatic controversy that demanded attention. All of this contributed to an image of self-sufficiency. It was a place where old superintendents went to retire and new ones went to train. It was the kind of place Hurtado had alluded to: a place waiting to be known.

I was tempted to borrow Rothman's "second class" sites concept but refrained. Under the circumstances, this administrative history represented a "first cut," a first chance to address a variety of topics. My aim became to present as complete a story as possible with the available information. I adopted an informational format, using cause-and-effect analysis, and tried to illustrate how the patterns of the monument's management history began with its inception, contrary to what some believed. I also tried to establish the monument's history within the context of agency history to offer some comparative standard.

In the end it became clear that the monument existed on the outer reaches in geography only. Otherwise it was tied directly to or influenced by the Park Service mission as it evolved. In a sense this shortened the monument's distance from the agency's mainstream. Remoteness and size, moreover, formed significant management themes. These conditions along with the monument's noncontroversial nature contributed to several management "firsts." Craters of the Moon was among the first in its region to be blessed with Mission 66, to have a resource management plan, and to be comprehensively researched and scientifically understood. It was the first area in the national park system to have a designated wilderness. Less positively, it generally ranked high among parks frequently overlooked for funding and staffing.

Other historians may expand on some of these topics in different studies or take a more "academic" approach to Craters of the Moon. My reward was far more simple than writing a definitive work about national parks and American culture. My reward was that park staff learned things from my history, things as simple as the construction of a trail. I, in turn, learned that administrative histories and the historians who write them fill voids in knowledge, and help tell us who we are and how we got here.

David Louter, a project historian in the NPS Pacific Northwest Regional Office, is in the Ph.D. program in history at the University of Washington.

1 "The Significance of Public History in the American West: An Essay and Some Modest Suggestions," *Western Historical Quarterly* 19 (August 1988): 302–12.

2 *Preserving Different Pasts: The American National Monuments* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); *Bandelier National Monument: An Administrative History* (Santa Fe: National Park Service, 1988).